### The Common Good

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Everywhere, it seems, people who write about society are claiming that our most basic social problems are caused by a lack of commitment to the common good.

What exactly is “the common good?” The idea came about over two thousand years ago. More recently, the ethicist (a person who writes about morality) John Rawls said the common good is “certain general conditions that are … equally to everyone’s advantage.” The common good, then, is having all the systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend work in a way that benefits all the people. Examples include an affordable health care system, an effective public safety system, peace around the world, a fair legal system, an unpolluted natural environment. These systems all have such a powerful impact on our well-being that it is no surprise that our social problems are tied to how well these systems are working.

As these examples suggest, the common good does not just happen. Establishing and maintaining the common good requires the cooperation of many people. But this work pays off, for the common good is available to all members of society. The common good can be enjoyed by all. All persons, for example, enjoy the benefits of clean air or an unpolluted environment.

It might seem that since all citizens benefit from the common good, we would all willingly help to maintain the common good. But there are some obstacles that stand in the way of successfully doing so.

First, different people have different ideas about what is worthwhile or what makes “the good life for human beings.” A second problem is there are people who receive the benefits of the common good but refuse to do their part in maintaining it. A third problem for those who want to promote the common good is that of individualism; our tradition places a high value on “doing your own thing.” Finally, there is the problem of an unequal sharing of burdens. Maintaining a common good requires that some people have to pay more than others.

These are big problems for those who call for the common good; however, we should not ignore the calls for the common good. Paying attention to the needs of the many causes us to think about the kind of society we want to become and how we can achieve that society. It also causes us to see ourselves as members of the same community and to pursue the goals we share in common.